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APNewsBreak: Water agencies push bigger role in tunnel plan

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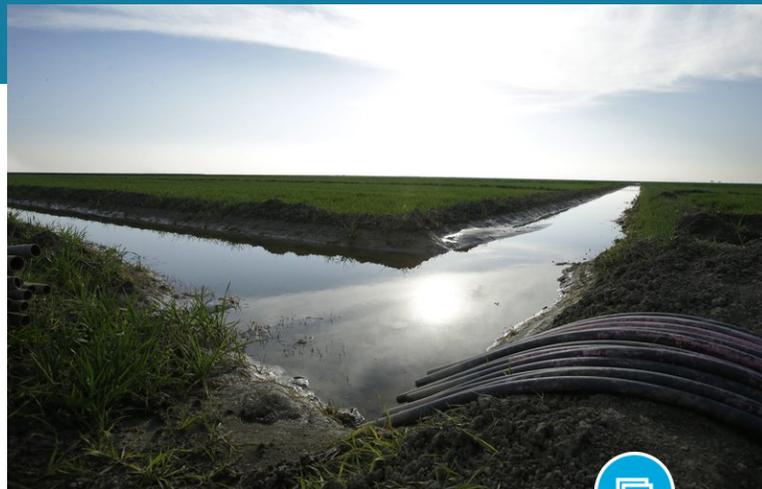
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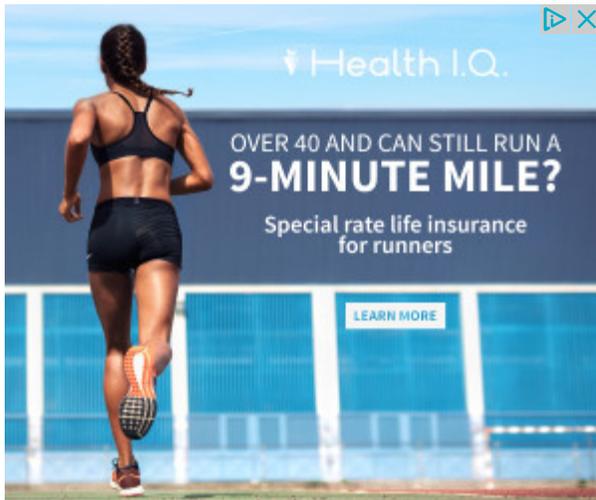
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FRESNO, Calif. (AP) — California’s powerful regional water districts are working alongside Gov. Jerry Brown to take on more responsibility for designing, building and arranging financing for a \$15.7 billion twin tunnel project that would ship water southward from Northern California as they push to finally close the deal on the controversial plan, two officials working closely on the project told The Associated Press.

Talks among Brown’s office, state agencies and the water contractors have been under way since May that could lessen the state’s hands-on role in one of California’s biggest water projects in decades, according to the two sources, one a senior official involved in the project, the other an employee working closely on the project.



They spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to publicly reveal details of the talks.

Some water district officials said the move, to be done by a group of regional California water agencies in what is called a joint-powers authority, or JPA, would speed up the mega-project, which they say is needed to modernize California's existing north-south water delivery systems.

Critics who oppose the tunnels said the change could allow California's big water districts to cut corners on issues affecting public safety and the environment.

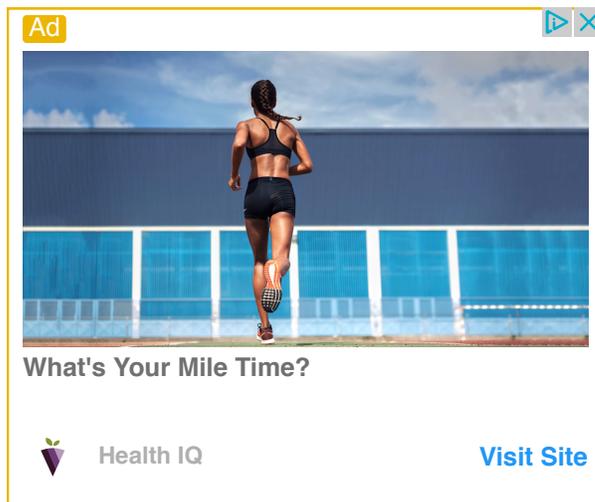
Asked for comment, state spokeswoman Nancy Vogel said Friday that talks were under way between the state Department of Water Resources and the regional water agencies "on the structure of the entity that would design and build WaterFix," which is the name Brown's administration has given the proposed tunnels.

"Details have not been finalized, but our shared goal is a structure that assures the best design and construction talent and protects state oversight," Vogel said. Brown's press office did not immediately respond to an email seeking comment.

Brown long has pushed projects that would streamline the delivery of water from the delta of Northern California's biggest rivers, the Sacramento and San Joaquin,

southward to water districts selling water to cities and farms, mostly in Central and Southern California. The current plan calls for 35 miles (55 kilometers) of two 40-foot (12-meter) high tunnels.

The group of water agencies, which includes the biggest urban and agricultural water suppliers in the United States, has engaged in years of talks on the tunnels, but the current proposal as described by the two people involved would give the agencies a substantially bigger role in shaping the final outcome.



“The water contractors don’t believe DWR is capable of delivering a \$15 billion project,” said the employee working on the project.

The water agencies forming the JPA for financing and construction is something that they think makes sense, said the senior official. He said the state would still play a role.

Patricia Schifferle, an environmental consultant who opposes the proposed tunnels, contended the water districts that would get and sell water from the tunnels long have pushed for a more direct role building them.

“It’s an outrageous takeover of a public process and public resources,” Schifferle said.

This spring, Brown's administration has pushed especially hard for the water districts, which want the tunnels in theory but fear the costs, to commit to a plan for paying for the project so construction can get under way before Brown leaves office next year.

Many see it as a legacy project in the vein of Brown's father, Gov. Pat Brown, who built much of California's existing water infrastructure, and Brown has mocked critics, telling an audience in 2015: "Until you've put a million hours into it, shut up, because you don't know what the hell you're talking about."

Advocates for the tunnels say they would provide more reliable water to the 25 million Californians to the south who get some or all of their water from California's north-south water delivery systems. Opponents say the project would harm the delta and the San Francisco Bay, and the communities and already struggling native species that get their water there.

Delta residents have accused the state Department of Water Resources of already delegating too much decision-making to the water contractors that would benefit from them financially.

The aim is for water districts that would take part in the tunnels project, mainly in Central and Southern California, to make a final decision by September if they are on board with the project or not, the official said. Water districts then would sign an agreement with the state giving them a greater role in financing, design and construction. Officials would break ground on the years-long project in summer of 2018, assuming state and federal regulators give all the needed approvals.

Tom Birmingham, general manager for Fresno-based Westlands Water District, one of the water agencies in the talks, denied that the proposal under consideration now would give water agencies a bigger role in the design and

building of the tunnels.

But he acknowledged water districts have concerns about how well the state DWR can take on the complex tunnels project given other pressing jobs, including repairing two dam spillways that ruptured this winter at one of the state's most vital water reservoirs.

"It's not a question of DWR not being able to get it done," Birmingham said. "It's a question of how are we able to move this forward."

Knickmeyer reported from San Francisco.

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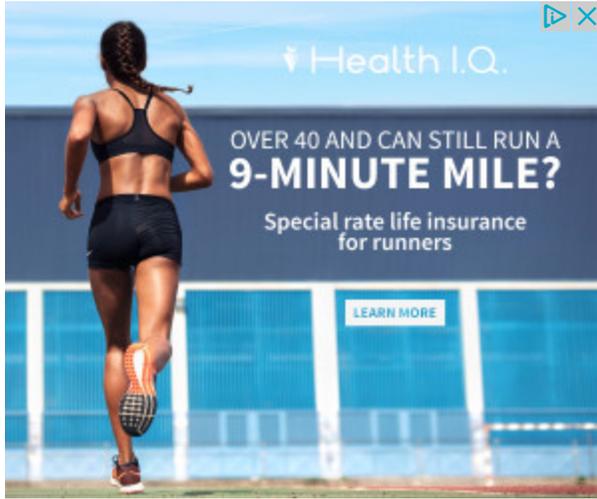
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